
REVIEWS

Francis X. Hezel, S.J., *The New Shape of Old Island Cultures: A Half Century of Social Change in Micronesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001. Pp. xi, 198, illustrations, bibliography, index. US\$49 cloth; \$21 paper.

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THE LATEST BOOK from the prolific hand of Father Francis X. Hezel offers a synopsis and analysis of social change in Micronesia during the latter half of the twentieth century. The book's nine chapters address a broad spectrum of topics: family, land, gender roles, birth, marriage, death, sexuality, political authority, and population and demography. The topic of social change has always been Hezel's consuming interest, as he states in the preface (p. vii), and many of his discussions here build on his earlier writings in numerous books and articles. This book, however, is especially valuable in bringing together Hezel's observations and analyses in an easily accessible and quite readable format. The book also makes a unique contribution in its presentation of Hezel's central thesis that these diverse changes are all part of an interrelated "web of change" (p. 155), set in motion by the fundamental shift from a land-based subsistence economy to a cash-based wage economy in Micronesia.

The Micronesian islands examined in this book include Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia (Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, and Kosrae), and the Marshall Islands. This area encompasses a number of distinct cultural groups, yet Hezel rightly points to the "ethnographic particularism" of most anthropological studies of Micronesia during the past half century, and he offers his

book as an “attempt [at] bolder syntheses of the main cultural features of these island societies” (p. viii). For this task Hezel is eminently well-prepared. The book is based upon a very careful and comprehensive reading of Micronesian anthropology and history, supplemented by Hezel’s thirty-five years of perceptive and wide-traveling observations throughout the region. Perhaps no other contemporary scholar in Micronesia has the combination of mastery of the corpus of written scholarship as well as long-term, intimate communication with hundreds of people from the different cultural groups throughout the region. The voices of these people speak clearly in these pages, and they receive generous acknowledgment in the chapter notes, alongside the more-conventional scholarly sources on Micronesia.

The organization of *The New Shape of Old Island Cultures* is rather unconventional for an academic study of social change, but it works well. The nine chapters comprise thirty-two brief sections, each about four to eight pages in length. Each section opens with a brief description of an incident from contemporary Micronesian life, many of which read like short excerpts from an anthropologist’s field journal. For example, Hezel describes a loud dispute between two Chuukese women by the side of the road; another section opens with a teenaged girl helping her older sister, who is in late pregnancy, to board a plane for Guam, where the older sister intends to give birth. Each vignette presents a picture that is somehow problematic from a “traditional” Micronesian perspective, yet today is a fairly common occurrence. Following each opening scenario is a succinct ethnographic or historical review of the topic, and then Hezel’s brief analysis and reflections on recent social change. The sequence of sections flows well, although readers could also sample sections selectively or in random order and still discern the main argument.

Most, though not all, of the individual sections allude to the shift from subsistence to cash economy, which is the prime causal factor, in Hezel’s argument, for the whole interconnected complex of changes occurring in Micronesia. In the chapter on gender roles, for example, there are four sections. The first, titled “The Gender Gap,” concisely reviews the ethnographic literature describing gender complementarity in Micronesia and concludes that women are entering new roles and “demanding real equality with men” (p. 50). The next section, “Men’s Changing Roles,” makes the argument that “women are doing more than their fair share of the family chores” (p. 51), mainly because the shift from subsistence agriculture to store-bought food has relieved men of much of their former subsistence labor in providing food, but has not relieved women of the work of preparing the food and caring for the house and children. “The Cultural Roots of Women’s Power” describes the four major roles that women once played in Micronesian societies—as

“guardians of the land, keepers of the peace, counselors on family and community matters, and producers of cultural valuables” (p. 57). Hezel discusses each role in the various island cultures, and he concludes that since these roles “are embedded in the lineage, there has naturally been some attrition in these roles as the extended family weakens in force” (p. 57). The final section in this chapter is titled “The Wave of the Future?” and briefly describes the emergence of two new patterns: double-income couples in which both husband and wife are employed, necessitating “new rules for dividing the responsibilities of the household” (p. 63); and “the increase in the incidence of single mothers living in their own homes” (p. 64).

Most important is the concluding chapter, in which Hezel draws together the separate threads of the individual sections. With good inductive logic he makes a strong case that “the emergence of a cash economy based on wage labor” was the prime force that led to these diverse cultural and social changes (p. 155).

For a fairly small book, this wide breadth of more than thirty separate topics necessarily results in a highly compressed and abbreviated treatment of each. Although Hezel adopted a writing style and format designed for his intended audience, I think many readers will wish, as I did, that he had expanded many of the sections and produced a longer work. More attention could have been given to the significant differences from one cultural group to another, without at all weakening Hezel’s overall argument, particularly in regard to women’s status and security and to chiefly power.

With the exception of the last two chapters, on political authority and migration, Hezel’s focus is primarily at the level of changes in the family. One topic that is conspicuously absent is emergent class differences in Micronesian societies, though Hezel alludes to this in sections on land, exchange, and public celebrations. Theoretically inclined readers would expect that the Marxist approach taken here would have led to a closer examination of issues of wealth and class conflict in contemporary Micronesia; perhaps it is still too early in the historical process to see these effects of an expanding wage economy and the commodification of land.

This book will be of value to a wide readership of Micronesians and non-Micronesians alike. It provides both a very useful summary of much ethnographic writing on Micronesian cultures and a well-informed and fair appraisal of how these cultures are changing. Hezel presents a lucid thesis about the underlying cause of social change in Micronesia, which is sure to provoke animated discussion in classrooms and seminars. And by pairing a series of everyday scenarios with detailed analyses, Hezel’s book demonstrates how a fine examination of brief moments of social life can reveal important underlying cultural patterns and historical trends.